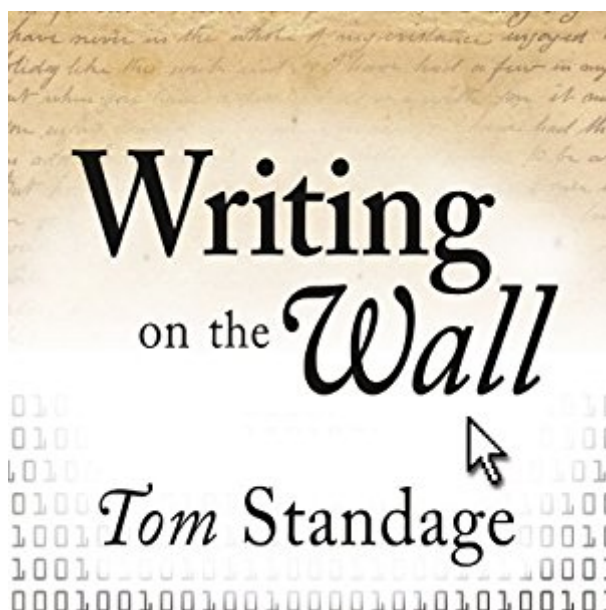


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# Writing On The Wall: Social Media: The First 2,000 Years



## Synopsis

Papyrus rolls and Twitter have much in common, as each was their generation's signature means of "instant" communication. Indeed, as Tom Standage reveals in his scintillating new audiobook, social media is anything but a new phenomenon. From the papyrus letters that Roman statesmen used to exchange news across the Empire to the advent of hand-printed tracts of the Reformation to the pamphlets that spread propaganda during the American and French revolutions, Standage chronicles the increasingly sophisticated ways people shared information with each other, spontaneously and organically, down the centuries. With the rise of newspapers in the nineteenth century, then radio and television, "mass media" consolidated control of information in the hands of a few moguls. However, the Internet has brought information sharing full circle, and the spreading of news along social networks has reemerged in powerful new ways. A fresh, provocative exploration of social media over two millennia, *Writing on the Wall* reminds us how modern behavior echoes that of prior centuries - the Catholic Church, for example, faced similar dilemmas in deciding whether or how to respond to Martin Luther's attacks in the early sixteenth century to those that large institutions confront today in responding to public criticism on the Internet. Invoking the likes of Thomas Paine and Vinton Cerf, coinventor of the Internet, Standage explores themes that have long been debated: the tension between freedom of expression and censorship; whether social media trivializes, coarsens, or enhances public discourse; and its role in spurring innovation, enabling self-promotion, and fomenting revolution. As engaging as it is visionary, *Writing on the Wall* draws on history to cast new light on today's social media and encourages debate and discussion about how we'll communicate in the future.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The internet has changed our ability to interact with one another profoundly. Seems obvious to those who actively use the tools so easily available to us like facebook, twitter, whatsapp, etc... Tom Standage gives a perspective on how people have interacted given the mediums of their time in the past and perhaps not so surprisingly, our patterns today resemble patterns of the past. After an era of centralized broadcasting catalyzed by the radio and TV, social participation has reverted back to peer to peer. Writing on the Wall discusses our history and some specific technological breakthroughs that changed the way we interact with one another. Writing on the Wall documents aspects of social interaction through the ages starting its first analysis with Roman Civilization. The author describes how messengers constantly delivered messages back and forth among the elite to keep each other abreast of the social and political spheres they operated within. The style was conversational and scribes for brevity had systems to efficiently condense common phrases to transcribe more efficiently. The author moves onto the origin of Protestantism with Martin Luther and the use of the printing press to disseminate information via pamphlet. The use of the printing press in spreading information was instrumental in igniting popular discontent with the corruption in the ecclesiastical system. The author discusses how in England poetry and clever and subtle rhymes were a means of earning a reputation and a source of creative outlet for the better educated. The author then discusses the role of the coffee house in the enlightenment and the migration from the social atmosphere of an ale house in which some of the darker aspects of social interaction happened to the coffee house facilitated lively debate and cross polination among intellectuals. The coffeehouse acted as a level playing field for all those who could afford the simple beverage. The author moved on to the newspaper and how it spread throughout the US and provided for lively political commentary. The stamp tax catalysed a backlash from the media who would be directly affected and were an example of how again, the printing press was a strong force to enable dissemination of information. In the US having multiple points of view was applauded with the hope that the best explanations and reasons would be appreciated, in France papers were used as tools to attack ones enemies. The author shows how public media can be a force for informational dispersion as well as a force for creating chaos and paranoia. The author moves on to how the radio was used and the TV as well. The radio being more peer to peer initially as the cost of being a reciever and a transmitter is not particularly different but after specific incidents where individuals were seen to be interfering with state business, radio transmission went into a more regulated

environment dominated by RCA (in the US) and BBC in the UK. The use of centralized media was instrumental in the spread of propaganda and controlling society (as in Germany) as well as a medium to advertise, as in the US. The author then takes us into the modern world with the internet and the rebirth of peer to peer communication. *Writing on the Wall* is a lively history of ways in which people have interacted through history. Peer to peer dominated social media interactions and marketing is becoming the norm again after a long period in which centralized media was the norm but in reading this work it is clear that this form of interaction has been the norm in the past as well. I enjoyed reading this, it's definitely not all new- the ability to publish different points of view as a consequence of the printing press is pretty obvious to most, but the author's discussion of how that medium was used in different ways in different times gives good perspective. Definitely worth reading.

First, a caveat: I am no history buff. I tended to avoid history through the years, but have appreciated Standage's approach to themed explorations of culture and civilization. I don't contribute actively in social media very often (save the occasional book/product review), but do appreciate its power and importance. Standage provides a nice overview of how these concepts have appeared universally through the ages and bursts the bubble on the idea that this is a "new" thing for us. It's not exhaustive yet it is inspirational enough to whet one's appetite for more. If I were to point out any flaws, I'd focus on two key areas:- bias to Western culture. There's no reference to Asian culture or to African culture. There's no way that either continent stood silent through the eons.- I expected to see some discussion of emojis and how these compare to petroglyphs and hieroglyphics through the ages. I'd easily recommend this for anyone keen on taking a look back as they consider the potential of emerging technologies. It's an interesting journey to see how innovation draws from honouring our longstanding traditions.

Tom Standage writes clearly as one would expect from an Economist journalist. His basic thesis, which is surely correct, is that the 19th and 20th centuries were aberrations as far as social media is concerned; centralised control of newspaper publishing, radio and television were a function of high capital costs of running such businesses. The Internet with its distributed networks and peer to peer publishing model is a return to old old media. Standage demonstrates the veracity of his thesis well, but it is thin grounds for a book length work.

*Writing on the Wall* provides context for future communication and collaboration through social

networks by looking at their historical role and impact. It also illustrates how those in power and the so-called intellectual elite have sought through time to control, regulate and censor free expression. My one criticism is that salient points and concepts risk getting lost among excessive and unneeded historical detail in some chapters. However, overall, it's an informative read and useful for anyone wanting to know how to connect, communicate and engage more effectively.

Fun to read -- the last half seemed to go a bit faster, though that could be me. I'd previously read *The Victorian Internet* by Standage and it seemed like this might have been similarly sourced...have also read quite a bit about the early history of television, which might also have made the latter part of the book go more quickly. Still, enjoyed it and can recommend it.

Great summary of the evolution of communication (oral, written, and technologically transmitted) and the need to express our most inner thoughts as well as shared knowledge.

Great study of social media from Roman times - when they wrote on literal walls to now. An overview of journalism and the media and how there is really nothing new under the sun..

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